

Message: “Mountaintop Experiences: A Tale of Four Hills”

What do you think of when you hear the phrase “mountaintop experience”? Some aspects include:

- Flows from this biblical reference.
- Familiar term for hikers, those who watch footage.
- Often means a high point in life when things are going well.
- For some, it can refer to isolation for meditation and wisdom, e.g. the hermit or guru who lives on the mountain.
- Broader view of the land below and the sky, sun and stars above, particularly the higher up you go.
- Place where we are alone with our thoughts.
- Requires a journey and effort to ascend and descend.

Mountaintop experiences are special.

This morning I’d like to share with you the Tale of Four Hills.

Matthew’s narrative of Jesus’ trip to the mountain with Peter, James and John is connected to the story of the people of Israel and the people of the world, then and now, in an amazing way. We find hope in what is revealed.

God’s Word is often referred to as a biblical drama. The Bible is a narrative that tells the story of humanity’s experience of God. We hear how God is at work with people from generation to generation, revealing what we need at the right time and place. God gives us the message we need, when we need it. That means the Spirit speaks to us and reveals things that were in plain sight. We just weren’t ready to see them.

For example, our scriptures for today are well known. Many of us are familiar with the story of Moses and the ten commandments and with the transformation of Jesus. In fact, today is called Transfiguration Sunday in the church calendar. As I studied and reflected this week, I discovered the scriptures are connected to the greater work of God in ways we may not realize. So let’s begin.

The first mountain is Mount Sinai or “God’s mountain.”

The book of Exodus is the story of a people’s journey from slavery to freedom. They left Egypt, fleeing from Pharaoh and his army. The people were in the desert on the Sinai Peninsula, wondering what to do.

God called. Moses listened and went to top of the forbidden mountain taking Joshua with him. He left his brother Aaron and Hur behind. A cloud covered the mountain for six days. Then God spoke. Moses entered the cloud and stayed there for 40 days. (Exodus 24:12-18)

God gives the people what they need. God gives Moses the Law, a way for the people to find a new life, free from slavery.

The second mountain is Mount Horeb, also "God's mountain."

The prophet Elijah went on a 40-day journey into the desert after God's messenger came to him. He left his assistant behind. Elijah was terrified because King Ahab and Queen Jezebel were trying to kill him. Elijah hid in a cave. As far as Elijah knew, he was the last of God's prophets. He didn't know what to do. Elijah felt isolated and alone, as many of us do at times.

God said, *"Go out and stand at the mountain before the Lord. The Lord is passing by."* Strong wind, earthquake, fire occurred but God was absent. After the fire there was a thin, quiet sound. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his coat and went and stood in the cave's entrance. Elijah knew he was in God's presence.

That's when a voice asked Elijah, "Why are you here?" (vv9, 13)

Elijah shared his tale with passion. That's when the Lord gave Elijah hope and a mission. God sent him to anoint new kings for the northern and southern kingdoms of Israel and to anoint Elisha to succeed Elijah as prophet. God also revealed there were 7,000 people who remained to support Elijah. God set the leaders on a new path. (1 Kings 19).

The third mountain is near Caesarea Philippi.

We aren't sure which mountain it was. Location doesn't matter. Peter, James and John didn't go for the view. They went because they were invited by Jesus. And they had an amazing experience. Let's start with a little background

Caesarea Philippi is in the far north of Galilee. That's where Jesus asked the disciples, *"Who am I?"* (v15) Peter gave an amazing answer, *"You are the Christ (Messiah), the Son of the living God."* (v16) Jesus

says it’s true, but tells them God revealed Jesus’ identity to Peter. Then Jesus swears the disciples to secrecy; it isn’t time to tell everyone yet. The disciples hear him, but the meaning doesn’t really sink in.

A week later, Jesus takes Peter and the brothers with him to a high mountain top. Luke tells us Jesus was praying when he transforms before them (*μεταμορφόομαι, metamorphoomai, where our word metamorphosis comes from*). Literally he changes before them. This change has spiritual, moral and physical implications. Moses and Elijah appear, speaking with Jesus. They are revered as the lawgiver and prophet. God points us back to the earlier mountaintop experiences when the people and leaders were given hope, free from their fear.

This revelation and experience is so startling and outside the box that we still struggle to accept or understand it. Some would rather cite group hysteria or psychosis than the possibility that a supernatural, spiritual event occurred. The story is so strange that most scholars believe a historical event really did happen.

Back to the story – the disciples are in shock. Peter doesn’t know what to do. He blurts out something odd, only to be interrupted by the sudden appearance of a bright cloud and a voice from the cloud that says, “*This is my Son whom I dearly love. I am very pleased with him. Listen to him!*” (v5). They fall down in fear and awe. Jesus says to them, “*Get up. Don’t be afraid.*”

God’s command to “Listen!” is important. God knows us. God doesn’t give us the leeway to substitute our tendency for human opinion to outweigh divine revelation. We are to listen carefully to Jesus’ words and for Jesus’ quiet voice in our heart and mind. Don’t be afraid.

God reveals and affirms the identity of Jesus as one who is worthy of our trust, love and worship. Jesus is the one who shows us a new way to be in relationship with God and with others. It’s an old way people forgot (Deut. 24). Jesus reveals this truth to his closest friends, those who will share the message with others.

We could stop there and say God’s work is done. We got the message about Jesus’ identity. We can rest: God’s met the prophecies. We heard Jesus’ sermon on the mountain. We get his message: the way

we live matters. We’re to be people who follow an ethical code, showing compassion to everyone in the same way God shows compassion to us. We’re to be people of mercy, peacemakers, with a sober realization that we aren’t spiritually whole: we need God, specifically Jesus, to pardon and heal us.

Yet Matthew, Mark and Luke won’t let us stop there (Matthew 17:1-13, Mark 9:2-13, Luke 9:28-35). We can’t stay on the third mountain top. That’s not the most important part of the narrative. Moses and Elijah also glowed (“*clothed in heavenly splendor*” – Luke 9:30) yet they aren’t divine, so we can’t say this is where Jesus’ true divinity is revealed. Luke’s language avoids the idea of divinity, but notes they were people going through an unusual occurrence. Jesus’ true power and glory are revealed on a fourth mountain.

The fourth mountain is Mount Zion, specifically Golgatha which is Aramaic for Skull Place or the Skull. This may seem like an odd choice. Yet the gospel writers don’t point to a mountain in Galilee as proof of Jesus’ divinity. Jesus’ change during joyful prayer isn’t where his work is done. Jesus’ divine work reaches it’s climax on a hill outside Jerusalem, where he died on a cross.

If we want to see Jesus’ divinity, strangely, we have to look at his suffering and death. That’s the puzzle we’re presented in scripture. Like it or not, it’s a puzzle we all have to wrestle with. Without Jesus’ death, there would be no empty tomb. Without Jesus’ willing sacrifice, there would be no disciples. Without Jesus’ resurrection, there would be no life after death.

We need to hold two images in mind to understand what Jesus means to us. The first is the joyful Jesus, filled with light and the glory of God. The second is the shameful Jesus, covered with darkness, blood and the sins of humanity. You cannot have one without the other. The way to light, life and glory will lead us through experiences of shame, suffering and death. Jesus’ perfect love and grace are waiting for us when we suffer. Jesus is called the “man of sorrows” (Isaiah ?). Jesus knows what it means to suffer, to be shamed in front of those you love and respect and to feel like we’re abandoned.

The paradox is that, in that very moment when we feel abandoned, God’s power and work are strongest. Evil, injustice and oppression don’t win. They are overcome by love, grace and mercy.

Jesus brings the powerful, life-giving love of God into focus. And he does so in a way that unites our past, present and future. No stone is left unturned. Jesus completes the law, fulfills God’s promises and makes dreams become reality.

These four mountaintop experiences are a lesson for us today.

The clouds of life surrounding us are confusing and distracting. First, do not fear. The Lord will free us from things that bind us. Second, you are not alone. The Lord is with you in surprising ways. We have hope. There’s a still, quiet voice speaking, when we’re ready to hear it. Third, focus on Jesus. God’s voice draws our attention to Jesus. Jesus isn’t just a prophet or a good and innocent person. Fourth, Jesus is the Messiah, God’s beloved Son, sent for the purpose of saving and healing us. God is pleased with Jesus. And God is pleased with everyone who hears the voice, embraces Jesus and follows him, freely and willingly.

The word to the disciples then is a word to us today. If you want to find the way to God, the way to the promised life, you must listen to Jesus.

Let us pray...

Exodus 24:12-18 (CEB)

The Lord said to Moses, “Come up to me on the mountain and wait there. I’ll give you the stone tablets with the instructions and the commandments that I’ve written in order to teach them.”

So Moses and his assistant Joshua got up, and Moses went up God’s mountain. Moses had said to the elders, “Wait for us here until we come back to you. Aaron and Hur will be here with you. Whoever has a legal dispute may go to them.”

Then Moses went up the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. The Lord’s glorious presence settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days. On the seventh day the Lord called to Moses from the cloud. To the Israelites, the Lord’s glorious presence looked like a blazing fire on top of the mountain. Moses entered the cloud and went up the mountain. Moses stayed on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.

Matthew 17:1-9 (CEB)

Six days later Jesus took Peter, James, and John his brother, and brought them to the top of a very high mountain. He was transformed in front of them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as light.

Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Jesus. Peter reacted to all of this by saying to Jesus, “Lord, it’s good that we’re here. If you want, I’ll make three shrines: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”

While he was still speaking, look, a bright cloud overshadowed them. A voice from the cloud said, “This is my Son whom I dearly love. I am very pleased with him. Listen to him!” Hearing this, the disciples fell on their faces, filled with awe.

But Jesus came and touched them. “Get up,” he said. “Don’t be afraid.” When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus.

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, “Don’t tell anybody about the vision until the Human One is raised from the dead.”